



February/March 2003

## River Restoration Takes Flight

*Birds flock back to the Kissimmee*



Nearly two years have passed since heavy equipment first rumbled through the Kissimmee River valley with a goal of restoring the river. More than seven miles of the channelized Kissimmee (which made the river shorter, straighter and deeper) was filled, returning the river flow along 15 miles of the river's historic route.

Since then, the task of environmental restoration has fallen to Mother Nature, and her work is right on schedule.

"All we can do is restore the historic hydrology of the system – put the river back into the physical form that existed before 1960," said Henry Dean, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District. "It is up to nature to restore the ecological integrity

of the system. The measure of how well we do our work will come from monitoring nature mending herself."

District scientists have 42 specific measures that nature must achieve before the District and its partner, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, can declare restoration a success. These success measures include expectations that the restoration will benefit more than 300 species of fish and wildlife.

"We have a long way to go, but less than two years after the first phase of construction we're witnessing encouraging changes in the river," said Joe Koebel, a senior supervising environmental scientist on the Kissimmee River restoration team.

The most obvious change is the return of a rich complement of wading birds, migratory waterfowl and shorebirds nearly absent from the Kissimmee valley for more than 40 years. Other obvious changes include the return of the historic sandy river bottom and sandbars. Restoring continuous flow to the river has flushed out more than 40 years of accumulated organic muck that damaged habitat and consumed life-sustaining dissolved oxygen.

Less obvious to many casual observers are the improved levels of dissolved oxygen – critical to the survival and proliferation of game fish, and the reappearance of the aquatic invertebrate food chain that is characteristic of natural river systems of the southeast.

"Common sense tells you that the complex web of life disturbed by the channelization of the Kissimmee River cannot heal itself over night," said Harkley Thornton, the District Governing Board member who represents the Kissimmee River valley. "Nevertheless, it is amazing to travel the Kissimmee less than two years after the completion of the first phase of restoration and see a river system teeming with life."

### RIVER RESTORATION SETS TONE FOR EVERGLADES PLAN

Beyond the direct benefits seen in the Kissimmee River valley, the river restoration is also setting a successful tone and creating momentum for the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, or CERP. In the Everglades, the same partners – the South Florida Water

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